

Topic & Comment

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Response to Sabine Fiedler

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I have been invited to respond to Sabine Fiedler's critique of my take on Esperanto, and wish to take up a few points. As evidence that learning English requires effort and energy (which no one has denied), Fiedler offers her own experience, and "recent studies on foreign language acquisition," for which she gives a single reference, an article by Claude Piron – incidentally an eminent Esperantist. There is, however, also a great deal of evidence to be found in the SLA literature that acquisition is aided by implicit or incidental or "unconscious" learning (or what Franceschini [2009] calls "unfocussed acquisition") by way of frequent exposure and input, e.g., subtitled television programmes, which is why Van Parijs (2011: 107) calls for an implausible ban, or at least a heavy tax, on dubbing.

Fiedler oddly seeks to deflect the standard accusation about Esperanto's "Eurocentrism" with a quotation stating that it only takes speakers of an Asian language twice as long to reach communicative competence as speakers of European languages. She concedes another of my arguments – that as time goes on, and/or with increased usage, Esperanto will fill up with loan words, and develop shortened and irregular forms – but trumps it by stating that these processes are already well under way. She then puts forward her main argument, which concerns the "creative-innovative language use" that is one of the "typical features of Esperanto communications," for which she gives a number of references with which I was indeed unfamiliar. It seems my error was to put faith in Fiedler's own statements about the "hypercorrectness" and "linguistic loyalty" of "idealistic" Esperanto speakers, and their "homogeneous" language use, in the articles of hers I quoted (Fiedler 2002, Fiedler 2006).

So it appears that Esperanto speakers do indeed regularly use opaque, non-compositional, metaphorical idioms, à la ENL (and not just the notorious "Krokodili!"), and borrow and calque from other languages, à la ELF. Meanwhile, native child Esperanto speakers are reported to ignore standard compound verb-participle constructions and aspectual affixes, relying instead

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on word order or merely discourse context, and to use a lot of phonological reduction, especially in grammatical suffixes and other unstressed syllables (Bergen 2001). Moreover, Okrent (2010: 258) states that the accusative ending -n is in the process of being lost, even amongst speakers of L1s that have an accusative inflection. All of this makes Esperanto sound very ELF-like, but I find it hard to believe that Zamenhof would be rejoicing. On the contrary, I suspect he'd feel that his baby, with its admirable simplicity (or perhaps simplicity-plus-not-strictly-necessary-accusative-marker), was turning into a kind of Desesperanto. It seems somewhat contradictory to champion a language simultaneously for its simplicity and regularity, and its "higher degree of variation than is allowed [...] in other languages."

References

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